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ABSTRACT

This article shows how to make poetry relevant to high school students. The technique involved is one in which the student is shown just those meanings which he can spontaneously relate to his emotions and interests. This synthesis can be made by using the lyrics of popular songs. The student can see the images, mood and dramatic situation of the speaker-singer, sense the ironies and tensions in the statements, watch how the ending of the song grew out of beginning--become aware in other words, of all those poetic elements and functions which the beginning student might one day see brought to perfection in the great poetry of our heritage. In addition to foreshadowing in song lyrics this kind of formal significance in poetry, the teacher might ask his students to express and bring into awareness their feelings about what the lyrics say. At the right point in the course of study, the teacher may make the transition from popular lyrics to the poetry of a poet such as E.E. Cummings or Dylan Thomas. (CK)

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THE FALLACY OF THE COMMON TONGUE[1]

HOMER HOGAN

Today I am supposed to say something about teaching poetry. How do I begin, and how do I presume? So many questions arise. The first, and most worrisome one, is this: whatever I say, why should you believe me? Mass merchandising has made us all, if not wise men, at least shrewd consumers. Inadvertently, Madison Avenue sells scepticism everywhere, and with increasing success. And so if I come here knocking on your door, hawking my theoretical wares, naturally you want to see my credentials.

Allow me, then, to present my strongest claim to authority on this subject—namely, the fact that I am speaking as a former high school student—most important, a high school student with a severe learning disability. In terms of what goes on in an English classroom when young people are asked to grapple with the great poets of our heritage, that condition is probably typical for most of the students we have to teach. Now actually, my disability was not in poetry; my special incompetence was geometry. But as I shall try to show, my basic difficulties with geometry were really not so different from those faced by students who first encounter formal poetry, and perhaps the analogy will help to bring the fundamental problems of teaching poetry into sharp relief.

To begin, I note that for me, geometry was *dumb*—in every sense of the word. Literally, geometry was dumb because it did not speak to me. And this was not just because I could not understand the meanings of geometrical terms. Even when they were pointed out to me I still heard nothing—or at least nothing I was supposed to hear. That a straight line is the shortest distance between two points struck me as being only rather obvious advice on how to take a walk, and the fact that parallel lines could never meet just seemed a little sad. The *significance* of the meanings, in other words, was lost to me. Hence geometry also seemed dumb in the sense of being dull and stupid.

How could my teacher help me to overcome this obstacle, to apprehend the real significance, instead of just the correct meanings of what geometry has to say? One possible strategy might be to show me examples of elegant proofs for geometrical classics like the Pythagorean theorem. That way my teacher could display the function of definitions, rules, and procedures, and equipped with this understanding of the use

[1] Originally entitled "Poetry and Relevance," this paper was presented to the Canadian Council of Teachers of English, August, 1970. Copyright held by Professor Hogan.

of geometical language, I would then grasp the beauty of a pure deductive system and thereby experience geometry in terms of its formal significance. But obviously such a strategy would be absurd. As a dense and reluctant novice, I couldn't possibly follow elegant mathematical reasoning, nor would I be able too share any of Pythagorus's concern for squared hypotenuses.

An opposite strategy then suggests itself. My teacher could lead me, step by step, showing me at every juncture some clear, practical application of what he is teaching me—say some new pointer on building a bird house. Now this method would seem to be more promising. But there are difficulties here, too. It would be hard to find practical applications for every step along the geometrical road, and anyway, bird houses and such might eventually lose their excitement. In short, the prognosis for this approach reads early success turning to fatal boredom.

Fortunately, however, my instructor, a delightful mad man named Brodsky, avoided the extremes of these two strategies. Instead, Mr. Brodsky combined the best features of both. Beginning with simple problems of carpentry, archery, fly-casting, and football—to mention only a few of his bags—he enabled geometry to speak to me in a halting but very clear way, and then, just when it all began to sound obvious, dull, and mechanical, he'd write on the blackboard some incredibly complex formulation of higher mathematics which he immediately turned into pure magic. One, he said, showed that the universe is curved, that if we could all keep walking straight ahead we would eventually arrive at exactly the same place we started from. Another, he declared, somehow connected the system of the atom with that of the planets, and of the planets to the galaxies. And once he showed us a book by a great philosopher—probably Spinoza—who used the geometrical method to demonstrate the existence of God. Of course, what he was saying was almost unintelligible to the class. But enough came through to make geometry suddenly a field of wonder. By giving us hints of man's greatest mathematical achievements and what they could signify, Brodsky seized our imagination and for the semester at least, committed us to the pursuit of our subject. The necessary grind and dullness could be borne, even by me, for somewhere out there Bodsky's glories were beckoning us on.

But what has all this to do with teaching poetry? A great deal, I think. Consider first my principal difficulty with geometry, namely, the fact that its language lacked significance for me. I suggest that the language-significance problem is also the root difficulty of the average poetry student. Many of you will agree with me, I'm sure, but frankly I believe that only few of us realize the severity of this problem in our poetry classes. What blocks us is something I call the *Fallacy of the Common Tongue*. Here's the way it works: the teacher finds that he speaks English, the poets speak English, and his students speak English.

He therefore concludes that all parties can communicate in English. Of course he knows that some words will sound strange to his students, but believing in the efficacy of a common language, he thinks he can translate the strange words into familiar ones. Furthermore, his students smile or frown, nod or shake their heads, and make all sorts of other signs that they do or do not "understand" his translations. The sad truth, however, is that the appearance of communication in a common language does not necessarily imply the reality of such communication—especially when the talk is about poetry. More than any other subject one can think of, poetry requires a sharing of not just verbal meanings or identifications of things words refer to, but *feelings*. In fact, what a poem "means" is never what it is principally trying to communicate. Poems exist to make us give a damn about what they say, or mean, or point to. Poetry, in brief, is pre-eminently *significance*. And the significance of poetic meaning is a matter of how the words and their meanings resonate in the life experience of each individual listener. Now surely between the life experiences of the teenager, his teacher, and the great poets, there can be only the most tenuous kind of contact. Thus despite the common language linking beginning student, teacher, and great poet, real communication will in any given instance probably be very slight, if indeed it takes place at all.

But some may object that what I am saying is nothing new, that I'm merely laboring the obvious. In reply, I again assert a sceptical suspicion. If anyone wants to see some grounds for my doubts, let him look at the poetry textbooks now being used in high schools and colleges. By and large they are still using poems by Robert Frost, Browning, Shakespeare, and other leading poets of our heritage to introduce students to poetry. How can we account for such exercises in futility? The only explanation seems to be that the editors of these texts are still caught in what I called the Fallacy of the Common Tongue, despite the lip-service they pay to the difficulties of connecting the experiences of teenagers to the incredibly subtle and sophisticated thoughts and feelings which win poems a place in literary tradition. Surely an editor of a geometry textbook never makes such a mistake. The language of geometry is so clearly distinct from the language students speak that he immediately recognizes the need to begin with the simplest possible elements of his subject and then carefully work from there. The editor of the typical poetry textbook uses in effect the first strategy I mentioned in my remarks on teaching geometry. He takes as his starting points elegant and complex objects of study, hoping to show, perhaps, how the elements of these objects acquire their significance through their functions in finely wrought structures and harmonies. As I pointed out, such a strategy would be an ideal way for a geometry teacher to exhibit significance in his field—if it worked. But the reluctant student is such that it simply can't work for him—

neither in geometry or poetry. Pythagorus and Robert Frost are not beginning places.

I say Frost, by the way, because he is the favorite of those who use the strategy of excellence. Here again we see the influence of the Common Tongue Fallacy. Frost's words and statements are so simple; who could fail to understand him? But understanding his meaning and grasping his significance are vastly different achievements. Consider, for example, his little poem, *Fire and Ice*. The basic meaning should be clear to a ten-year-old; from what I know about fire and desire, and ice and hate, says Frost, either combination would be capable of destroying the world. To apprehend the rich significance of this meaning, however, and of the way it is delivered, a child or teenager would need to sense the peculiar quality of relief the poem provides when uttered by one burdened with an intimate, life-long knowledge of man's inhumanity to man. That is a little much to expect. The most probable result of teaching the poem to benighted beginners is a myriad of notebooks filled with scribbled approximations of what the teacher says the students *should* feel—in other words, another instance of conditioning students to depend on the intuitions of the instructor instead of their own, another step toward permanent isolation of students from poetry. And all because the illusions of shared language fooled the teacher into believing that he could begin with literary excellence rather than take the long road that leads up to it.

Well, then, what is this long but surer road? It is the path provided by the second strategy I described for teaching the language of geometry, the one on which the student is shown just those meanings which he can spontaneously and genuinely relate to his emotions and interests. To follow this procedure in teaching poetry may require the teacher to start with third-rate, simplistic verse—even, perhaps, sentimental drivel —and then gradually sharpen perceptions and deepen the resonating chambers of the young student's experience. The first question, in other words, is not what good poetry can I offer to my students, but where are they *at*?

And yet in teaching poetry, as in teaching geometry, there is a serious limitation to this strategy of relevance. If young people don't move from where they are at, if they never see more than what they can understand and clearly relate to, they'll become restless and bored. They need—and today insist upon—visions of wonder, even of that which passes all human understanding. What is required in teaching poetry, therefore, is a synthesis of these two strategies of excellence and relevance.

But how, specifically, is this synthesis to be made? For myself, the answer came two years ago when I pondered what old man Brodsky would do if he were teaching poetry instead of geometry. Brodsky would obviously begin with the poetry that already has significance for young people—the lyrics of their popular songs. He'd let these lyrics

step forth, inviting his students to see the images, imagine the mood and dramatic situation of the speaker-singer, sense the ironies and tensions in the statements, watch how the ending of the song grows out of its beginning—to become aware, in other words, of all those poetic elements and functions which the beginning student might one day see brought to perfection in the great poetry of our heritage. But Brodsky would do more. In addition to foreshadowing in song lyrics this kind of formal significance in poetry, he would ask his students to express and bring into awareness their feelings about what the lyrics say, or more accurately, make present. This way he would be preparing them to receive the significance of great poetry for *living*.

And then, I think whenever the moment was right, Brodsky would perform one of his magic tricks. Suddenly there'd be a sonnet by Shakespeare, a word-dance by E. E. Cummings, an incantation by Dylan Thomas—and the poetic heavens would open, not for note-taking, but wonder.

This, in brief, is what I believe would be the Brodsky answer to the problem of teaching poetry. In my book, *Poetry of Relevance,* I try to work out this answer in detail, using popular songs as bridges to the study of formal poems.[1] Whether I lived up to the grand man who helped me pass geometry, I don't know. But I have one great advantage that would not have been available to Brodsky in his day. This is the fact that in the last ten years popular song lyrics have often risen to the level of genuine, even astonishing poetry. Using song poems by writers like John Lennon, Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, and Leonard Cohen, English teachers can not only engage students in terms of what really concerns them, but also, at the same time reveal the presence of wonder, stimulating them to develop the poetic sensitivity that can disclose this essential quality of art in ever more magnificent varieties. And then of course there is the New Music impelling the New Lyric. Playing the record of a Beatles' song in class, one does not have to cajole students into feeling an emotion toward what is said. The extraordinary music directly and immediately floods the room with feeling—all that the teacher need do is encourage the students to interpret it, to relate it to the words and their lives.

Fusing music and poetry, relevance and excellence, those who are now using these new pop and folk songs as launching pads achieve some highly gratifying results. My colleague, Professor Ken Weber of the Ontario College of Education who helped me prepare *Poetry of Relevance,* describes these results in his paper, "Teaching Folk-Rock," which my publisher, Methuen Publications, will send to any teacher who writes for it. In concluding, I shall venture a slogan for expressing what people

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[1] Homer Hogan, ed., *Poetry of Relevance* (2 vols; 2330 Midland Avenue, Agincourt, Ontario: Methuen Publications, 1970.)

like Professor Weber and his students are doing. Putting together songs, formal poetry, the concerns, yearnings, and joys of young people, and the mysteries of artistic creation, they say, in the words of the current Lennon-McCartney hit, "Let It Be." And more frequently than I think even Brodsky could imagine, that is exactly what happens.

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